

How Money Defined the Romans

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Abstract

Scholarly discussions often focus on what money is and how to define it. This paper, however, does not pursue the question of how the Romans defined money, but rather how money defined the Romans. The importance of money in Roman political tradition was not initiated by Roman imperialism, nor by Roman familiarity with the Greek invention of coinage. Centuries before the Romans knew coins, established their empire, or founded the *res publica*, the Roman state used money to define members of its community. This paper argues in favour of an umbilical relation between money and the Roman state; more specifically, between money, the state's established system for reckoning wealth, the *census*, and the centuriate assembly. It focuses on the archaic Roman state and the revolutionary Servian reforms, which redefined money while simultaneously using it to define who was a Roman and what his civilian obligations were.

Theoretical Framework

Money is a social convention.¹ It is a general agreement to use a system of symbols in order to represent a scale of magnitude that signifies value. As such, money provides a standard according to which all goods and services can be evaluated and compared. Thus, in its essence money is abstract. It is a theoretical notion derived from human numerical capacities. Physical manifestation is not a prerequisite for choosing monetary symbols. However, more often than not the symbols that represent money are materialized in specific objects, by their nature tangible and concrete. These physical monetary instruments indicate the units of measurement that we call money. Thus, money has a Janus-faced oddity, it is simultaneously both an abstract and a corporeal thing.

In the Mesopotamian and Mediterranean worlds of the first millennium BC metals have typically been used as monetary instruments, and from the sixth century BC onwards, money often has been associated with coinage. While metal, whether or not coined, is corporeal, units of weight and account used to measure metal are abstract. The relation between metal and money, as between coin and money, is that which exists between symbol and value, between signifier and signified. The nature of this relation is dictated, among other things, by numerical patterns of thought. That is, common use of certain numbers, number series, and ratios, and the familiarity of wide segments of a society with using these, affects the relation between money and the monetary objects representing it.

To conclude, it is with 1) a definition of money as abstract, 2) an appreciation that money can be manifested in various ways, and 3) an acknowledgement of the importance of numerical thinking in creating and using money that I approach the specific historical issue of the relation between money and the archaic Roman state.

The Servian Reforms

This paper is dedicated to the reforms of Rome's sixth king, Servius Tullius, who according to traditional chronology ruled the city for approximately 40 years starting from 578 BC² Roman tradition as preserved in late Republican sources – mainly in the works of Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus – ascribes to Servius Tullius a series of reforms that set the organization of Rome's citizen body for centuries to come.³ According to tradition, Servius founded two citizen assemblies: the *comitia tributa* based initially on a territorial division of the citizens, and the *comitia centuriata* based on a timocratic division. He also initiated the *census*, an institution intended to organize military recruits and probably the collection of tax or tribute.⁴ In addition, he passed a monetary reform, on which the sources give different reports.⁵ According to Pliny “King Servius was the first to stamp a design on bronze”, while Varro states that “it is said that Servius Tullius was the first to strike silver coins”.⁶ Together, these elements touch upon almost every aspect of Roman governance: military organization, taxation, regulation of measurements, citizenship, voting assemblies, and political power.

This paper claims that the Servian reforms redefined money while simultaneously using it in a revolutionary way to define who was a Roman and what his civilian obligations were. It was the Servian system, as it is often called, which set the long lasting umbilical relation between money and the Roman state, based on the *census* and its use of monetary units of account to organize the timocratic *comitia centuriata*, which became one of the Republic's most dominant assemblies.

The Numismatic Evidence

The frame of the numismatic debate was set more than a generation ago by Michael Crawford.⁷ A summary of his observations follows: Rome did not produce coinage of any sort before the end of the fourth century BC, and its archaeological record “is devoid of coin finds earlier than the third century”.⁸ Yet, this does not mean that Rome had no money. Archaic Rome, like contemporary Apennine communities, used bronze as monetary instrument.

The fact that Roman tradition ascribed to Servius Tullius a monetary reform supports the claim that from an early age the community's authorities were involved in overseeing a

standard of bronze as commodity money. This was the famous Roman pound (*libra*) known from archaic time as the *as*. The archaic *as* was divided into twelve *unciae* and represented a basic unit for both weight and territorial measurement.⁹ This archaic unit should not be confused with later coins called *asses*, though our mid and late Republican sources sometimes tend to interpret it as such. Thus, Servius' reform must have established a certain weight standard, which acted as a monetary unit of account, or re-evaluated an existing one. It could have set a new weight standard to the *as* or the *uncia*. Other than that, the exact nature of Servius' monetary reform remains uncertain.

What is certain, though, is that in later periods the Roman monetary unit of account called an *as* went through several re-evaluations. When Rome began to cast its own bronze coinage, probably during the 280s BC, she had done so on a standard of about 324g, known as the 'libral' *as*.¹⁰ Just before or at the start of the First Punic War, Rome started casting bronze at a lower standard of about 265g, the so-called 'sub-libral' *as*, weighing ten *unciae* rather than twelve.¹¹ During the Hannibal War, Rome introduced, probably in 212/1 BC, her new long-lasting monetary system based on the *denarius*. It re-tariffed the *as* at a lower weight standard of two *unciae* per *as*, the so-called 'sextantal' *as*, while preserving its traditional division as a monetary unit into twelve *unciae*. Ten such new *asses* officially equalled a *denarius*. Finally, around 140 BC another reform was passed. A lower weight standard of one *uncia* per *as* known as the 'uncial' *as*, perhaps sporadically used earlier that century, became binding. And, it was combined with a re-evaluation of the *denarius* as a monetary unit, which now equalled sixteen new *asses* rather than ten.

While the re-tariffings of the monetary unit called an *as* in terms of a weight unit called an *uncia* is important for understanding the numerical information preserved in the written sources, it tells us little about the Servian reform. Whatever the precise nature of Servius' monetary reform was, it had to be connected with other major reforms, which the sources ascribe to him. Perhaps detecting patterns of numerical categorization, mainly in the timocratic *comitia centuriata*, might be of help.

The *comitia centuriata*

The *comitia centuriata*, being a timocratic assembly, demanded assessing the quantifiable wealth of citizens according to a unit of measurement, which was set and regulated by the state. It categorized citizens in units, originally for military recruitments, which acted as voting units for political as well as fiscal purposes. According to Roman tradition, this institutional and conceptual framework for defining and organizing the Roman citizen body was founded in the sixth century by king Servius Tullius.

In the fullest traditional narrative, preserved in Livy (1, 43) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (4, 16–21), Servius established the *comitia centuriata* as a one-time

constitutional act, creating at once its complex organization of 193 centuries. These were timocratically divided into five *classes*, in a sophisticated organization well known from the late Republican sources. Both Livy and Dionysius report a similar formation, and the information is repeated in table 1. Beside a difference in the minimum *census* required for the fifth *classis*, Livy and Dionysius show minor differences in the armor description of the fourth and fifth *classes*, and in the assignment into *classes* of the two centuries of engineers (first *classis* in Livy, second in Dionysius), and the two of hornblowers and trumpeters (fifth in Livy, fourth in Dionysius). Other than that their reports give the same information.¹²

Class	Livy 1, 43		Dion. Hal. 4, 16–18		Dion. Hal. figures in <i>asses</i> ¹³
1	≥ 100,000 asses	43, 1	≥ 10,000 drachmas	16, 1	≥ 100,000 asses
2	≥ 75,000 asses	43, 4	≥ 7,500 drachmas	16, 3	≥ 75,000 asses
3	≥ 50,000 asses	43, 5	≥ 5,000 drachmas	16, 4	≥ 50,000 asses
4	≥ 25,000 asses	43, 6	≥ 2,500 drachmas	17, 1	≥ 25,000 asses
5	≥ 11,000 asses	43, 7	≥ 1,250 drachmas	17, 2	≥ 12,500 asses
<i>proletarii</i>					

Table 1: Minimum *census* requirement in Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

Differences between Livy and Dionysius are commonly seen as evidence for their use of independent sources, though general agreement regarding the main details indicates that their sources were relying on the same now-lost source. As noted already by Theodor Mommsen, late Republican and early Imperial sources suggest that this lost source was an official legislative document traditionally ascribed to Servius Tullius, which existed in Augustan Rome and regulated the organization of centuries and *classes*.¹⁴ What it prescribed and when it was written is unknown, but there are reasons to doubt that it was written under king Servius. In fact, it is widely agreed that the complex division of the Roman people into 193 centuries was not created instantaneously. Rather, it was a historical process by which the *comitia centuriata* developed into its fullest organization, observed in late Republican sources.

Changes in the *comitia centuriata*

Roman antiquarian tradition preserves evidence of an early twofold division of the archaic *comitia centuriata* into *classici* (those within the *classis*) and *infra classem*.¹⁵ Presumably, only the former could afford to fully equip themselves for battle with hoplite weaponry and were recruited regularly to the Servian legion.¹⁶ This dual system is probably the one to have existed in the time of Servius. The fact that our sources preserve no trail of an explicit additional reform suggests that there was never such a reform. Instead there was a long and slow series of changes, which eventually brought about the five *classes* system. There are several possibilities to reconstruct this development.

One may presume that an archaic division would allow for the richest, the *patres/patricians*, to be distinguished from the rest of the citizen body, especially if they were to serve as *equites* and not as infantry. Taking into account what we know of hoplite armies, it is unlikely that only the *classici* were recruited to the legion if this group was comprised only of those holding the high *census* of the first *classis*. We can speculate that initially the *comitia centuriata* included both *classici* and *infra classem*, the division being between a majority of infantry hoplite recruits (the latter) and an elite of *equites*, perhaps the *patres/patricians* (the former).

A reform that might have introduced a three *classes* system – perhaps with a *census* of above 100,000 *asses*, between 100,000 and 50,000, and below 50,000¹⁷ – fits the reports of Livy and Dionysius on the similarities in weaponry of the first three *classes*. It corresponds with the division of the legion into 60 centuries, as opposed to the 40 centuries of *iuniores* of the first *classis*, and reconciles with Fraccaro's reconstruction of the monarchic hoplite army as consisting of the first three *classes*.¹⁸

Another reform might have introduced a four *classes* system whose existence is supported, first, by the *census* figures for the first to fourth *classes* in both Livy and Dionysius, which form a numerical series, for which the following figure should be zero.¹⁹ Neither Livy's nor Dionysius' figure for the fifth *classis* fit this series. Second, Polybius, while giving the same minimum *census* as Livy and Dionysius for the first *classis*, gives a figure of 400 drachmas (=4,000 'sextantal' *asses*), mentioned by neither Livy nor Dionysius, for the minimum *census* required to serve in the infantry, which in the mid-second century BC can only relate to the fifth *classis*.²⁰ The three different *census* assessments for the fifth *classis*, together with additional less straight forward evidence regarding early Republican penalties and rewards,²¹ leads to the conclusion that the fifth *classis* was a later amendment. Prior to it, the *comitia centuriata* consisted of only four *classes*.

A last reform, which was the end of the development, introduced the five *classes* system, and is the only one that can be roughly dated to the fifth or fourth century. Prominent scholars align it with the introduction of the *stipendium*, Roman military pay, during the long siege on Veii (406 BC),²² and connect it with the start of Roman collection of the *tributum*.²³

To end, one may postulate that this series of changes was embedded in the context of the patrician-plebeian struggle, and that repeated reforms might have given some relief to the growing demands of the plebeians.

Within this long trail of adjustments, the only reform that made a real difference was the first, that of Servius. It set the rules of the game for the *comitia centuriata* as a timocratic assembly, establishing already in the sixth century the framework for Roman public life. Even though the practicalities of the *comitia centuriata* went through considerable changes, its essence as a timocratic assembly was not altered for centuries.

The Servian Monetary Reform

We are left with the question of the nature of Servius' monetary reform. Can anything be established beyond the condense report by the anonymous fourth-century A.D. writer of the *liber de viris illustribus urbis romae*, which states that Servius Tullius "establishes the measures, the weights, the classes, and the centuries"²⁴? To our aid come numerical patterns in our evidence, summarized below.

We know that the Roman *libra* was divided into twelve *unciae*, following a duodecimal system. Also, we know of three occasions when a re-tariffing of the *as* took place: In the third century the *as* was re-tariffed at a weight of ten *unciae*, the so-called 'sub-libral' *as*. In the Second Punic War it was re-tariffed at a weight of two *unciae*, the so-called 'sextantal' *as*, ten of which equalled a *denarius*. And, after 140 BC it was re-tariffed at a weight of one *uncia*, known as the 'uncial' *as*, sixteen of which equalled a *denarius*. These re-tariffings show a mixture of duodecimal and decimal systems of reckoning together with a hexadecimal one.

Secondly, *census* categorizations of the *comitia centuriata* show several numerical patterns. The four *classes* system can be seen as quaternary, which might fit with Polybius' 400 drachmas *census* qualification for infantry. However, the *census* of the first four *classes* is a numerical series of a decimal or quinary nature; a reckoning system ascribed by Plutarch also to archaic penalties.²⁵ Republican military pay norms, not discussed here, show patterns of a ternary system.²⁶ Finally, Columella's division of the *iugerum*, Rome's land measurement, exhibits a mixture of duodecimal and decimal/quinary elements.²⁷

Clearly, archaic Rome knew both quinary/decimal and senary/duodecimal systems of reckoning, and in the mid Republic the two systems were habitually integrated. Could it be that the Servian monetary reform was responsible for a formal integration of the two reckoning scales? Contemporary Etruscan evidence, slim as it is, might suggest that some conceptual numerical change perhaps took place in the sixth century. For example, a recent study of Etruscan dice evidence shows that in the early seventh- to fifth century BC a new combination (namely, 1-6, 2-5, 3-4) had become the norm.²⁸ The Servian monetary reform might have been part of a more general shift, that organized

the use of different numerical systems in an officially binding relation, re-tariffing an existing duodecimal system and combining it with a decimal one, known from the calculations of penalties, and in the third century used also for the so-called ‘sub-libral’ *as*. The current state of the evidence, alas, allows no decisive conclusion.

It is clear, however, that the Servian monetary reform was just one element of a much wider re-organization of the archaic Roman state. Combined with the introduction of the *census*, the *comitia tributa*, and the *comitia centuriata*, it created institutional mechanisms, which allowed the state to supervise its populace, distribute its members into units and classes and in accordance decide their privileges and obligations. Setting an official monetary standard to assess citizens’ wealth was a crucial factor in this fabric.

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Notes

¹ Objects representing money derive their value, partly or wholly, from the social convention that designates them as money; Tobin 2008.

² Thomsen 1980; Cornell 1995, 119–126.

³ Servius is credited also with expanding the city’s territory, fortifying it with a wall, and dedicating a temple to Diana to be a center of worship for all Latins.

⁴ This line of interpretation follows Last 1945; Cornell 1995, 179–197 esp. 190–194, who shows how the combination of the two *comitiae* enabled a proficient mechanism to carry out the *census*.

⁵ Mattingly 1943.

⁶ Plin. *HN* 33, 43; also, Cassiod. *Var.* 7.32.4. Varro, *Annal.* 3 apud Charisius, *Gramm.* ed. K. Barwick (1964²): 0134 (= Keil, *Gramm. Lat.* 1, 105). Neither reconciles with the numismatic evidence.

⁷ Crawford 1974, 35–46, table in 44–45.; 1985, esp. 17–24.

⁸ Crawford 1985, 20.

⁹ *Colum.* 5, 1, 8–13.

¹⁰ Which slightly shifted upwards in the 270s to about 334g and 331g; Rutter 2001, 46–47.

¹¹ Plin. *HN* 33, 42; Coarelli 2013.

¹² *Liv.* 1, 43, 1–13; *Dion. Hal. ant.* 4, 16, 1–17, 4; Cornell 1995, 179–180.

¹³ Assuming: (1) Attic/Alexandrian drachma = denarius; (2) denarius = 10 ‘sextantal’ asses.

¹⁴ *Festus* (290 L), who relies on Varro’s lost *rerum humanarum*; *Cic. orat.* 46, 155–156.; *Varro ling.* 6, 86–87.; *Liv.* 1, 60, 4. Mommsen 1887, 245; Cornell 1995, 180.

¹⁵ Plin. *HN* 33, 43; *Gell. A.* 6, 13; *Festus* (100 L); Cornell 1995, 183–184.

¹⁶ As inferred from the verb *calare*, ‘to call’ or ‘to summon’; Thomsen 1980, 176–177; Cornell 1995, 184.

¹⁷ Rathbone 1993, 133, 136–137.

¹⁸ Fraccaro 1931; Cornell 1995, 181–185.

¹⁹ Rathbone 1993, 140.

²⁰ Pol. 6, 23, 15, for the *prima classis*. 6, 19, 3, for the infantry.

²¹ Rathbone 1993.

²² Liv. 4, 59, 11–60, 8; Diod. 14, 16, 5; Crawford 1985, 21–23; Cornell 1995, 185–189.

²³ Nicolet 1976, 27–29.

²⁴ Ps.-Aur. Vict. vir. ill. 7, 8.

²⁵ Plut. Vit. Publ. 11.

²⁶ Pol. 6, 39, 2; Rathbone 1993, 151–152.

²⁷ Colum. 5, 1, 8–13.

²⁸ Artioli et al. 2011; Maras 2013.

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Table 1 by the author.

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